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Long Shots

WITH ECHOES



America's triumphant team.
Back row, from left: Yale, Fulton
and Hepburn. Front row: Bodine,
Team Captain Wingate (?), Dakin
and Gildersleeve. Remington and
Sharps cartridge rifles prevailed!

Though thrice defeated by Americans with breech-loaders, the Irish held stubbornly to muzzle-loading match rifles. This Rigby is a beautiful example.



September's sun felt like July's. John Bodine craved a drink to cool and wet his parched throat. It might even steady his nerves. A long day of firing heavy, powerful rifles had come down to one shot. His. It would decide the match that had drawn two teams of elite marksmen and 8,000 spectators to this bald expanse. Like British moors, Creed's farm seemed bent on reaching continent's rim, beyond the tents and parasols, the hacks, bicycles, and carriages. Long paper-patched bullets hurled by thunder-claps in a haze of shifting white smoke had already minced the air downrange—and yielded to its implacable currents. It might let his next bullet claim victory for his team or, with breeze too light to stir thistledown, muscle it off a target the size of a prairie schooner.

Tall and thin, with a sun-bronzed face and gray hair, Bodine squinted toward his 6x12-foot mark. At 1,000 yards it appeared as big as the period at the end of a sentence of newsprint a foot from his eye.

A hand emerged from the crowd with a bottle of ginger beer. Bodine grabbed it eagerly, nodding his thanks. But then, as he opened it, the neck broke. Glass knifed his trigger hand. Blood gushed.

In 1873 at Wimbledon, Ireland's riflemen trounced the English and the Scots to snare the coveted Elcho Shield. That November, Major Arthur Leech, captain of the Irish squad, printed a challenge in the *New York Herald*. His sharpshooters would pit their talents and long-range

muzzle-loading rifles against "any American team" and their rifles. Each team would comprise six men, firing three "rounds" at 800, 900, and 1,000 yards, 15 shots per round.

Tales of buffalo hunters and Indian fighters aside, those were extraordinarily long distances. The .44-40 bullets from Winchester's new Model 1873 repeater fell nearly 3 feet at 200 yards from a 100-yard zero! The Army's 1873 "trapdoor" Springfield fired the .45-70, a cartridge with much greater reach. Still, with a 200-yard zero, its bullets sank 145 feet at 1,000 yards! Few U.S. rifle ranges would accommodate shooting beyond a quarter mile. Matches in North America had evolved from a hunting culture, and from wars fought with patched

round balls. Even commercial hunters on the prairies did their killing up close. Powder and lead were precious; so too the time and effort finding animals. Lost game was lost revenue.

Oddly enough, in Great Britain, target shooting at extreme range was more common.

The Amateur Rifle Club of New York had no international champions in its ranks. But it decided Leech's challenge could not be ignored, however formidable the Irish team. Colonel George W. Wingate, a founding member of the nascent National Rifle Association, was tasked with assembling a U.S. squad. Most had military backgrounds. Besides Colonel John Bodine, he chose General T.S. Dakin, Major

The Irish
champs drilled
bullseyes at
half a mile.
America's
amateurs had
yet to find
a rifle!

Henry Fulton, Lt. Colonel H.A. Gildersleeve, and G.W. Yale, adding Remington engineer L.L. Hepburn, soon to develop the Remington-Hepburn No. 3 single-shot rifle and, after 1886, Marlin's enduring lever-actions.

The Americans faced immediate challenges. The match was just 10 months off, and they had no suitable rifles! No team member had ever fired at targets 800 yards away, let alone 1,000, where bullets arced into targets at downward angles nearing 30 degrees. In addition, while the U.S. had agreed to host the event, no venue had come to mind.

Keen to help, the NRA and the cities of New York and Brooklyn dredged up \$5,000 each to build a range on Long Island's Creed's Farm,



Remington's L.L. Hepburn-designed match rifle featured a 34-inch barrel in .44-90. Note the stud for a heel-mounted sight. Some shooters fired on their backs, legs forward to steady their rifles. RIGHT: Donated by the State of New York, the Creedmoor range was built with help from a nascent NRA and the cities of New York and Brooklyn. About 8,000 spectators attended the first match there.

secured by the State of New York. But where to find rifles that shot like those of the reigning champs?

The Irish front-loaders were the best Great Britain could produce. The popular Rigby was not just beautiful but exceedingly accurate. Any new breech-loader would barely be match-ready by September 26, 1874. The contest rules were plain. Rifles would be of 44 caliber, have metallic sights, scale no more than 10 pounds, and fire the same charges of black powder. The English target's 6x12-foot face included a 3x3-foot square bullseye (4 points) and a 6x6-foot "center" (3 points). An "outer" (two points) extended 2 feet on either side—charity for shooters caught by swings in the speed and direction of air currents.

In March 1874, L.L. Hepburn brought to the U.S. team a match rifle on the Rolling Block action that, in the wake of the Civil War, had rescued Remington. When armistice brought a halt to government contracts, the company scrambled to introduce a profitable hunting rifle. The Rolling Block was simple, stout, quick to load. It accommodated an almost limitless range of metallic cartridges. The breech-block, thumbed after the hammer to expose the chamber for extraction and reloading, was then pivoted forward. It was locked by the hammer upon firing. Sportsmen liked Rolling Blocks. After an 1873 hunt, George A. Custer noted that with his he "killed far

more game [than his companions] at longer range." When buffalo hides fetched \$50, a Rolling Block rifle could bring a market hunter \$10,000 a year. Bob McRae downed 54 of the beasts with as many shots from one stand with his .44-90 Remington.

L.L. Hepburn's 1874 "Creedmoor" version of the Rolling Block featured target sights and double set trigger. Its stiff .44-90 barrel was rifled for long 550-grain bullets. Later, at market, this rifle would sell for \$100, when a basic version or a lever-action repeater cost less than \$20.

The sun rolled up hot at Creed's Farm for the Grand International Rifle Match. The ground was dry. Dust hung over roads ushering onlookers from New York City. Many came on foot, on tall-wheeled bicycles, and in city hacks. The well-to-do rode coaches and special runs of the Long Island Railroad. Competitors gathered at 10:30 in front of cordons keeping the crowd at bay. The Irish were odds-on favorites; but when that

team's Captain Walker bellied down on his firing point, he found the target a shapeless fleck bobbing about on a sea of mirage. Rarely did such conditions visit Britain's cloudy Isles!

Aiming as best he could, Walker fired. And missed.

Cheers behind the ropes drowned out the groans. Wingate appealed for quiet as America's Fulton came to the line and laid on his back, feet toward the target, ankles crossed, supporting his rifle with his leg. The Remington bellowed. Through the smoke, the marker appeared. Bullseye! Onlookers roared their approval. The 800-yard stage ended with the Irish trailing 326-317. Hardly a rout.

After lunch Ireland's young but talented Milner steadied his rifle at the line. Like his teammates, he had minded the morning's cruel lessons in reading mirage. His Rigby heaved its heavy bullet. Seconds later, 900 yards downrange, the white marker rose. Bullseye! The crowd

applauded. But wait! The range officer shook his head: Milner had shot at the wrong target! A cross-fire. No score.

But shortly misfortune visited the Americans. One of Dakin's bullets landed well shy of the iron target. A faulty cartridge. Again, no score. As the 900-yard stage wore on, clouds blocked the sun's glare and all but erased mirage. America's lead shrank to 7 points.

The Irish found their footing at 1,000 yards, finishing strong and leaving the Americans to close a 931-913 gap with six bullets. Fulton would send the first three, Bodine the last. While Fulton had scored well all morning, he struggled as pressure built for him to do so now. His three "centers" put only 9 points on the board as Bodine walked to the line.

He had little room for error. The Americans needed 10 points to win. A miss would hand the Irish the match. At least one hit had to be a bullseye. At 1,000 yards, each pulse bump, each ounce he pressed from the trigger



Remington developed its Rolling Block Rifle for civilian markets. Buffalo hunters used it. The brilliant engineer Lewis L. Hepburn modified it to build an elegant, accurate arm for the 1874 Creedmoor match.



WHAT ABOUT THE SHARPS?

The 1874 Sharps rifle appeared just before Christian Sharps died of tuberculosis. It quickly earned the favor of buffalo hunters – and, in this .44-90 Creedmoor variation, of long-range target shooters.

mattered. A wiggle of wind, downrange and undetectable, could cost him a point. Or two.

Bodine's Remington boomed, its big ribbed slug arcing toward the speck, now behind a curtain of smoke. Seconds later: the marker. Bullseye! Hands slick with sweat, he reloaded and swiped his brow. With care but promptly, lest conditions change, he loosed another. It too added four points! The American team was now a shot away from a win—or forfeiting the Grand Match.

He had to relax. His muscles were quivering. Sweat stung his eyes and blurred the sight picture. Bodine laid the rifle down and stood. The crowds pressed tight against the cordons behind and along the bald alley's hem downrange, under a thin umbrella of smoke. He nodded his thanks for the ginger beer.

Then the bottle shattered. His bloodied hand drew gasps. He grabbed a handkerchief thrust his way,

and another. What timing! This was the most important shot he would ever fire! Teammates brought a wrap to stanch the bleeding.

It seemed to Bodine the world was watching as he bellied down, his trigger hand now little more than a club. Blood oozed from the cloth keeping his palm from the rifle. Carefully he let his finger search out the trigger. And there in the aperture was the speck.

The .44-90 belched. All was silent, even after the audible strike: Whock! But seconds later, as the white marker rose, the crowd erupted in a roar. Bullseye! America's team had prevailed, 934-931!

The following year U.S. shooters and their breech-loaders would again defeat the Irish, this time in Dollymount, Ireland. They would fire the top scores at Creedmoor in the Centennial Match of 1876 to trounce teams from Australia, Canada, Ireland, and Scotland. Despite these victories,

The Sharps name most commonly turns up in tales of Old West buffalo hunts. The 1874 Sharps rifle was a favorite of commercial hunters. But it had an infantry ancestry. Christian Sharps apprenticed under the severe tutelage of John Harris Hall, who'd patented a breech-loading rifle in 1811. Striking out on his own in 1837, Sharps designed a better breech. His 1848 patent described a vertically sliding block run by the trigger guard. Firing paper cartridges, it replaced the lock on the 1841 Mississippi Rifle. Unlike Hall's design, it did not leak gas.

That design evolved. Months after the Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Co. announced its first action for metallic cartridges in the New Model 1869, it trotted out the New Model 1874. Alas, tuberculosis took Christian Sharps early in 1874. Sharps cartridges (six .40s, three .44s, four .45s, three .50s) were noted for their power; but they were also proprietary, which in some quarters hobbled rifle sales. Target versions of the 1874, like Hepburn's Rolling Block for the Creedmoor match, were coveted, though the Sharps lock was slow and cartridges could be inserted ahead of the extractor—a weak claw by some standards. F.W. Freund's conversion to speed loading went nowhere at company headquarters.

breech-loading rifles would not turn up at Great Britain's Elcho Shield match until 1878, when the English Eight team fielded a Remington, a Sharps, and three Metfords.

In an article for the March 4, 1915 issue of *Arms and the Man* (published by the NRA before *The American Rifleman* appeared in 1923), Major C.W. Hinman described the rifles popular for "old time long range match conditions." In his era, a typical match began with a period for sighting shots. Then shooters fired 15 shots each at 800, 900, and 1,000 yards. No sighters were allowed at 900 or 1,000. Lunch brought a pause after the 800- or 900-yard stages, the 1,000-yard finish to follow. Bullsyes were worth five points. Hinman claimed that only two men besides himself had tallied 224 of a possible 225 during a match, all in the 1880s.

"Any rifle" matches permitted single-shot breech-loaders weighing no more than 10 pounds, with

trigger pulls of at least 3 pounds. Many shooters used Sharps, Borchardt, and Remington-Hepburn rifles, "but my score was made with the earlier Geiger," wrote Hinman. Barrels of soft steel 34 inches long were about 1-3/16 inches in diameter at the breech "and 13/16 inch at the muzzle." Most bores were of 448 to 452 caliber, commonly with five or six grooves .003 to .005 inch deep, as wide as or wider than the lands, with 1:18 twist.

Equipped with a spirit level, the front sight had a hooded aperture big enough to encompass the 4-ring at 800 yards. It was windage-adjustable to 50 feet at 1,000 yards. For shooting at long range, the rear sight, with Vernier scale and screw adjustment, would appear "not quite vertical when the spirit level was horizontal... to counteract the drift of the bullet...." The rear disc was changed to suit light conditions. Its apertures were typically .04 to .06 in diameter.

Some shooters who

"Taking home the hardware" in early matches meant just that! These ornate trophies were coveted by marksmen, whose rifles and skills were tested at 800, 900 and 1,000 yards.



HOW FAR DID YOU SAY?

The only way to determine the arc and accuracy of bullets at distance is to fire a lot of them at targets marked by the strikes. But claims of long shots in battle or on hunts are better entertainment. One of the most re-told of these sprang from the Texas panhandle town of Adobe Walls, June 26, 1874, short months before New York's Grand International Rifle Match. Buffalo hunter Billy Dixon was among 28 men asleep when at dawn, 700 Comanches under chief Quannah Parker galloped in, shooting. Three of Dixon's companions died before they found cover. Survivors repulsed the charge with rifle fire.

But two days later, hostiles still lurked on the town's perimeter. As legend has it, when a dozen or so appeared on a bluff nearly a mile off, Dixon, a renowned marksman, was handed the saloon keeper's 1874 Sharps. Dixon had used this .50 during the attack, so handled it well. Still, onlookers were astonished when, long seconds after the blast, a Comanche fell off his horse. A later survey was said to peg the range at 1,538 yards. Now, the bullet would have fallen so steeply that a ranging error of 50 yards would have likely caused a miss. And any wind, well Whether or not you believe Billy Dixon downed a hostile at 7/8 mile with a black-powder Sharps, legions with no evidence will agree with you.

fired in the "back" position—reclining, feet forward, rifle butt in the armpit, barrel resting between or against crossed legs—mounted the rear sight atop the heel of the butt-stock to increase the sight radius. But others fired from their backs through tang-mounted apertures. Of the dozen competitors who fired in the Grand International Rifle Match at Creedmoor, Long Island, on September 26, 1874, five lay on their backs to get what they argued was superior rifle support. The other seven

bellied into prone, a more versatile position and useful in hunting. Scores shot by reclining marksmen averaged 157, scores by prone shooters 154. Hardly a compelling disparity! Hinman insisted the back position was steadiest, even compared to prone with a sling.

A 550-grain 44- to 45-caliber match bullet was about 1 ½ inches long. It had a cupped base and a nose

LEFT: Firing at long range was from "back" positions as well as belly-to-the-earth prone. Legs supported the rifle. Some "back shooters" put the rear sight on the stock's heel to extend sight radius, improve accuracy. RIGHT: The .45-70 (left) has out-lived the similar .44-90, which C.W. Hinman used with black powder when the '03 Springfield was new. As regards accuracy, he wrote, the .44-90 and .30-06 were about equal.



Finely adjustable tang sights with very small apertures yielded surprisingly accurate aim. This fetching reproduction of an 1874 Sharps match rifle is from the Sharps Rifle Co. in Montana.

shaped "like the small point of an egg." Comprising 1 part tin to 11 parts lead for use with thin .002 paper patches, it reportedly gave better results with a 1:14 ratio inside .004 patches. The patch was wound twice about the bullet, which was placed in the bore ahead of the case. A charge of 105 to 110 grains of "rather slow-burning" black powder was poured through a long tube into the shell and confined there by a thin soft paper wad.

Hinman wrote that in his range trials, these rifles and the then-new 1903 Springfield yielded about the same level of accuracy. He noted a preference for a shaded front aperture to the bolt-action's post but conceded the Springfield's recoil was

roughly "half as heavy as that of the old long range rifle." He also wrote that wind didn't blow jacketed 180-grain .30 spitzers as far off course as it did lumbering 550-grain .45 match bullets. He pointed out that canting a big-bore, black-powder single-shot could cause a bigger lateral error at distance, as at mid-range its bullet was sailing twice as high over bore-line as the .30-06's.

Big optics, spunky powders, and needle-nose bullets have now made 1,000-yard pokes pedestrian. But the echoes of Creedmoor still reach shooters who can imagine fat, papered bullets sent far by squint-eyed men through smears of white smoke to seek specks of flotsam on restless air. ■

